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Atari Online News, Etc.
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->From the Editor's Keyboard "Saying it like it is!"
"""""""""""""""""""""""""""""

And another week bites the dust! What a roller-coaster ride we had with regard to the weather! Cold and wet early on, sunny and warm in the middle, and more cold and wet at the end! This was one weather "sandwich" I could have done without ('ceptin' the warm days!). I did, however, manage to get in a round of golf - possibly the last hurrah for this year's season. We'll see what happens.

Meanwhile, it's been too wet to clean up those leaves. And naturally, the weather was perfect for helping even more leaves fall, and get soggy! Maybe this weekend things will dry up enough to allow me to get back on track and gain an edge on this seasonal delight.

So here we are, a week away from Thanksgiving. I always enjoy this particular holiday, and everything that goes with it. As I've likely mentioned over the years, my primary role during this holiday is putting together all of the fixings for the turkey feast - a role I truly enjoy! And the best part occurs after the holiday - all those leftovers and no need for holiday etiquette!

So, as we close in on this holiday, all of us here at A-ONE wish to express our best turkey day greetings. A great day for family and friends gathering for a [hopefully] bountiful feast. And of course, if you're so inclined, curling up after dinner to watch some football! Enjoy!

Until next time...

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PEOPLE ARE TALKING
compiled by Joe Mirando
joe@atarinews.org

Hidi ho, friends and neighbors. Have you even been almost finished with a document and hit the wrong key combination or something and lost it all?

Yeah, it hasn't happened to me in a long time either. So, of course I've gotten somewhat lax about saving my work periodically.

Well wouldn't you know it, it happened to me this morning with this column. From now on, I'm going to try to be more conscientious about saving my work.

It's been three weeks now since I've had a column in A-ONE. It's driven me a little bit nuts, too, because there have been things I've wanted to point out and things I've wanted to say. Unfortunately, there haven't been enough messages in the NewsGroup to justify a column.

This week, after combining new messages with those from the previous two weeks' messages, we've finally got enough messages to make a go of it... I know that for a fact, since I've already done it once today.

One of the topics I've wanted to tell you about has had me so damned mad that I can't see straight. It's so counter to what I've come to think of as 'right' that I'm just... well, flabbergasted. I'm not even going to try to justify talking about it in a computer magazine. I'm not going to try to find some spiffy way to liken the situation to anything that's ever happened in the Atari world. Hell, if anything like this had ever happened in the Atari world, I'd have bugged out years and years ago.

Three weeks ago, a court case that I'd been watching for a while had been decided. The father of a fallen soldier (I don't recall now if he was killed in Iraq or Afghanistan) sued a church in Kansas that decided to protest at his son's funeral.

Now, if you know me at all, you know that I'm against the war (aka: invasion and occupation) in Iraq. But what you'll never, EVER hear me say is that our men and women in uniform should be treated with anything other than our most heartfelt thanks and respect.

While I do not often agree with the military mindset or their current supreme commander, what these men and women do is a sacred thing. As I see it, it's not even serving your country; it's serving your countrymen. And that service deserves, no, demands to be respected.

Every member of our military (and I include the Coast Guard here too) deserves our thanks and our respect.

And any soldier who falls in the commission of his or her duty, whether you agree with that duty or not, is deserving of our deepest thanks and our most sincere respect.

This particular church wasn't even local to the town where the funeral was held, and the subject of their protest had nothing to do with this particular soldier. You'll see in a moment why I'm so incensed about this, and that's only HALF of why I'm was so worked up.

You see, this church believes, as do many others, that homosexuality is a sin. Okay, that's their right. While you may not agree with it, you've got to admit that it's their right to believe it.

I've got to confess here and mention that, for all my liberal views and all my rhetoric, I'm very uncomfortable about gays. It's not that I'm afraid (as some of these church-goers seem to be) that I'll be 'turned' by contact with gays, or that I'll fall victim to them. I'm just not

really comfortable with them. They make me uneasy. There. I've said it. I know it's irrational, but that's the way it is.

Anyway, this church decided that the funerals of our fallen soldiers would be a good place to spread their views.

Picture this: A dreary day in a cemetery. A line of limousines, several members of the military dressed in their most ornamental and officious uniforms, with rifles at the ready in their white-gloved hands, and a grouping of relatives in dark suits and dresses, staring down into a rectangular, dark hole in the earth. And not too far off in the distance...

A crowd of jabbering, howling fools holding signs saying things like "God Hates Fags" and "911 Was God's Will".

First of all, I grew up being taught that God didn't hate anyone, and that what was between you and God was... well, between you and God. And if you didn't believe in God, then that was your choice. I still believe that.

Second, the soldier whose funeral they invaded was not gay, and did not (as far as I know) support gays in any public way. They picked his funeral service simply because he was a soldier and had died.

The soldier's father sued the church. The church claimed that they were perfectly within their rights, since the U.S. Constitution guarantees them the right to free speech and the separation of church and state.

Well, church folk, I've got bad news for you. Your right to free speech does not include infringing on someone's funeral. It means that your government cannot stop you from speaking your mind. It doesn't mean that you have the right to say ANYTHING you want ANYTIME you want ANYWHERE you want. With your rights come responsibilities.

Separation of Church and State means that the State cannot tell you what you must believe, not that you can tell everyone else what THEY must believe.

If you want to take out an ad in a newspaper and give your opinions, that's fine. If you want to preach your point of view in your church, I'll support your right to do so in any way that I can. But your rights do not include determining everyone (or anyone) else's rights. You cannot safeguard your rights by denying or curtailing someone else's. And I suspect (though I don't consider it canon) that there's a special section of hell set aside just for people who use religion (any religion) to spread hate and intolerance.

To make a long story... well, a little less long, the soldier's father sued the church and won a total of 10.9 million dollars in compensatory and punitive damages.

Of course, he'll never see a dime of that money, since the church will no doubt assert it's close relationship with God, and try to twist Separation of Church and State to fit it's equally twisted aims. They seem to think that the Constitution was written to apply only to them. Hmmm... I must have missed that passage in the Good Book.

Okay, I'm done for the time being. Let's get to the news, hints, tips and info from the UseNet.

From the comp.sys.atari.st NewsGroup
==========

Paul Matthews asks for help finding some applications:

"Hi All

I am looking for full copies of the following Atari applications in English please with manuals etc.

Kobold 3.5
NVDI 5 (Upgrade is fine as I already have version 4)
Jinee 2.5 or Ease 5
MagiC 6.2
ImageCopy 4CD
Positive Image 2
View II
Thats Write 3
Protext 6

Oh, I have managed to get hold of NVDI 5 and I am still looking to get hold of the other applications mentioned."

Peter West tells Paul:

"I think you'll find that Kobold 3.5 was never released in English. I have a version of 3.51 that I translated for my own purposes, but as it's still commercial, I don't think I am at liberty to distribute it."

Paul replies:

"Thanks for your reply, I have Kobold 2.5 german edition that was included with my Falcon which I purchased from Germany. I have tried to buy Kobold 3, MagiC 6.2, Jinee 2.5 and NVDI 5 directly from Ash, EuropeShareware and not one of these online companies has bothered to reply to my mail let alone take my credit card and sell me the stuff. I am left with no other option but to buy second hand or use copies. I want the full pack with manuals but two months i have only managed to buy NVDI 5 from a chap in Wales.

How did you translate kobold as there is no resource file? I would be happy to try out your version of Kobold and would be willing to buy the 3.5 German edition if somebody would sell it to me."

Derryck Croker tells Paul:

"Hope Peter doesn't mind me jumping in.

He would have used a binary file editor to directly edit the German text. We (DDP Translations) would have deal(t) with the wider distribution of the translation by generating a patch file with eed like we did with Papillon.

What tends to suffer is keyboard shortcuts, depending on how they were implemented."

Paul tells Derryck:

"Thanks for the reply, I think I may have bought some software off you in the 90’s? Is there a translated file for Kobold 3 available? If there is i will happily buy the German version (if some company is willing to sell it to me) and install the patched version. If not what utility would you use to change the text in the application?"

Peter Schneider jumps in and tells Paul:

"I think it depends on what you intend to do with KOBOLD. If you just use it as a fast copier, maybe you won’t need an English translation. If, of course, you’d prefer to execute /KOBOLD jobs/, ok, it’s better to know precisely (in your mother tongue) what you are doing.

Ok, German is a hard language to learn, but in some terms it is very close to English. If you’ve got questions concerning KOBOLD, ask them to me, and I’ll try to give you an answer. By the way: Did you ever see what happens when you click on the cactus you see when you have a look at /Über den KOBOLD/ (about the KOBOLD) in the /Datei/ (file) menu?

You know, so many people leave the Atari platform (nicknamed system changers to the industrial standard...), and at any these times a lot of hardware (and soft, of course) changes its owner.

A few weeks ago, a friend of mine got a spare TT from another friend of mine (for nothing) and got a lot of soft. I’m going to ask him if he has an original disk of KOBOLD that he won’t need and if he agrees to leave it to you."

Peter West jumps back in and gets back to the question of what utilities he uses for translation:

"I used hex_edit.prg to edit the text in the kobold.prg file and since English is normally shorter than German, it fitted; I padded with spaces where the new text was shorter than the old.

If you can obtain a legal version of the German 3.5, I will gladly let you have a translation. Note that I don’t have an English translation of the manual for 3.1 - only for 2.5. There isn’t much difference, except that 3 will handle long filenames - though only slowly since it copies these in GEMDOS mode, file by file.

Have you tried writing to the makers? They are (or were!):
Kaktus
H.J. Richstein & E. Dick GbR
Konrad Adenauer Str. 19
D-67663 Kaiserlautern
Germany."

Uwe Seimet tells Peter and Paul:

"I do not know a current address, but this one is definitely outdated. As far as I know Kaktus does not exist anymore."

'Art Go' asks for opinions on games:

"What do You think, guys? What are some of the best games for the Falcon 030? Any sort of list would be great..."

Ronald Hall tells Art:

"Umm, lets see...

Ishar 2
Ishar 3
Crown of Creation
Running
Robinsons Requiem
Killing Impact

and ST or STe games that I just like better on the Falcon:

Stardust
Obsession
Ultima 6

and actually many more, but thats it off the top of my head."

Hallvard Tangaraas asks for info on the MegaSTE's connectors:

"What's the connector on the left side of the Mega STe keyboard for? Apparently the mouse doesn't work with it, so is it for a joystick? Strange that they're not marked in any way.

Is it possible to (with the aid of e.g. an AUTO program) to make it work with a mouse?

Finally, is there a downloadable user-manual for the Mega STe somewhere? Actually, user-manuals for all the Atari ST computers would be nice, but I've only found sites containing service manuals, schematics etc (which is also great of course)."

Mark Bedingfield tells Hallvard:

"Digital joystick connector. Like all ST's the JS is controlled by the keyboard controller. No manuals available afaik, system disks would be handy too."

Everyone's favorite techie, Aly, adds:

"I used to have the MSTE disks somewhere. There's nothing different about them from the stock STs. The 16Mhz mode is automatically picked up by the later CPX versions."

Hallvard now asks about ethernet solutions for the ST:

"I’m hoping some of the German Atari ST users out there can help me....

I’m very interested in the EtherNEA solution ("EtherNE" interface board to be used together with PC compatible ISA type NE-2000 networking card and finally an "EtherNEA" board which connects everything to the ACSI port), or even better: the self-contained "Ethernet Adapter II" which connects to the ACSI port. Unfortunately the authors have never replied to my email, even though their websites are still active.

I’m trying to get in touch with:

Thomas Redelberger
(http://home.arcor.de/thomas.redelberger/prj/atari/etherne/index.htm)
and
Elmar Hilgart
(http://www.asamnet.de/~hilgarte/)

Perhaps someone who speaks better German that me could ask in a few German Atari ST newsgroups in case someone else knows about their whereabouts and possible new email addresses."

Dave Wade replies:

"I don’t think that these two have been involved for some time now. Lyndon built the last one I got. Whilst I don’t use mine very often I guess I could probably answer questions about them."

Hallvard asks Dave:

"Wasn’t Lyndon Amsdon involved only with the EtherNEC (the cartridge port version)?

I’m interested in the EtherNEA (the "A" standing for "ACSI" meaning it plugs into the Atari ACSI hard drive port). Is that the version you have?"

Dave answers:

"Nope, because I couldn’t find any connectors. When I spoke to Lyndon he said that the "A" version was much more tolerant of Ethernet card. What issue do you have?"

Hallvard replies:

"Well, I don’t have any ethernet abilities at all and thought the EtherNEA or Ethernet Adapter II looked like good solutions for my setup as my cartridge port is already chock full."

Dave tells Hallvard:

"I would guess that any work on this has stopped. The page elmar.hilgart’s pages has not been updated for 3 1/2 years, so the "new" and "available soon" are real oxymorons, but on

http://www.eh-systems.com/ there is a phone number. You might try that... Lyndon has moved onto a new USB and Ethernet cartridge port board, which is no use to you...

The etherNEA board is very simple. Why don't you try breadboarding one up on Vero?

When I build my EtherNec I really wanted to make a the EtherNEA but like you couldn't find a PCB layout or an ASCI port connector, so I built the EtherNeC as I managed to buy all the bits and it worked once I found an RTL8019AS card. I don't think any one has an Ethernet II card apart from Elmar, which is a pity. Again as the info on Elmars page say "First Prototype" then I guess he has never produced a commercial PCB layout. I wonder if the reason why is that if he does he must make the layouts available, as this is required in the license agreement for the software."

And last but not least, here's a very interesting post from Brian Bagnall:

"Last week I received a call from Karen Tucker, who is organizing the December 10th appearance of Jack Tramiel at the Computer History Museum in California.

The event will include key people from Apple, IBM, and Amiga (see below). When writing the book "On the Edge: the Spectacular Rise and Fall of Commodore" I tried getting an interview with Jack by calling him almost a dozen times, writing several letters to him, and getting his son Leonard to convince him - everything short of showing up at his ranch and demanding an interview. I'm in awe that Karen has been able to make this happen. Apparently she and Leonard convinced Jack that it was important for him to talk about his experiences before it was too late.

Karen wanted me to pass on some information. Basically Jack is done with the confrontational period of his life where he had to be hard nosed in order to run a company in a cutthroat industry. He's now a retired grandfather who spends most of his time traveling with his family. Karen wants Jack to feel welcome, where everyone in the audience can listen to his history with an open mind. Hopefully if he feels welcome at the museum he will participate in other events and we can eventually piece together his experiences in the early computer industry. Karen knows that most people will be receptive to Jack, but she was a little worried that a few might decide to throw his kind gesture back in his face by confronting him. If you know of anyone who plans to do this, please discourage them from attending.

From what I could gather, this is in celebration of the 25th anniversary of the C64. There will first be a one-on-one interview with Jack moderated by John Markoff of the NY Times. After that, Steve Wozniak (Apple II), Bill Lowe (IBM PC) and Adam Chawniac (Amiga) will take to the stage for more discussion.

The discussions will probably focus on Commodore, though it's possible his Atari history will be included. Everyone is welcome and if you aren't in the area there will be a video webcast of the event available on their website. This promises to be a great event, and I hope to see you there!

More information should be available soon at:
http://www.computerhistory.org/events/"

Now ain't that just too cool? Stay tuned for more information!

So that's it for this time around, kids. Tune in again next week, same time, same station, and be ready to listen to what they are saying when...

PEOPLE ARE TALKING

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->In This Week's Gaming Section - Wii Tops In Downloadable Games!
""""""""""""""""""""""""""""""""" Nintendo, Sony Roll Out Biggies!
Many Parents Avoid Kids' Gaming!
And more!

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->A-ONE's Game Console Industry News - The Latest Gaming News!
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Nintendo Wii Tops in Downloadable Games

Nintendo Wii currently has the greatest number of games available for download, though all are re-released titles says, Electronic Entertainment Design and Research.

While Nintendo's Wii leads in the quantity of downloadable games, Xbox 360 offers the greatest number of original downloadable games over Xbox Live Arcade, the research found.

Additionally, 84 percent of downloadable 360 games have online functionality compared with 45 percent of PS3 titles and zero percent for Wii games.

Only 12 percent of downloadable games are original titles, says EEDAR, especially given Nintendo's lopsided contribution of older games.

In terms of median game prices, PS3 titles are the cheapest at $5.99, followed by Virtual Console games at $6, and Xbox Live Arcade games at $10, the most expensive of the three. Furthermore, 80 percent of the downloadable content on the PlayStation 3 is free compared to just 29 percent on Xbox 360.

"In an environment with crippling production costs, publishers have new ways to dramatically impact their financial gain, while making gamers

happy, if they understand how to utilize the new generation of console storefronts," the report said, adding that games with downloadable content sell 114 percent more on average.

Nintendo and Sony Roll Out Big Titles

Two new video games from Sony and Nintendo have players exploring jungle islands for lost treasure or skipping across the galaxy to save a kidnapped princess.

On the face of it, Sony's "Uncharted" and Nintendo's "Super Mario Galaxy" can't be more different.

"Uncharted" harnesses the PlayStation 3's graphical muscle to produce a movie-like adventure, while "Super Mario Galaxy" for the Wii uses cartoonish graphics and simple controls to breathe new life into an aging franchise.

The games also answer challenges facing Sony and Nintendo.

Although Nintendo has been selling as may machines as it can make, players have started to grumble about the lack of must-have titles that offer a more rewarding experience than short mini-games.

That's where "Super Mario Galaxy" comes in.

A product of Nintendo's legendary game designer Shigeru Miyamoto, "Super Mario Galaxy" is being hailed as the most innovative and fun Mario adventure in more than a decade.

The portly Italian plumber once again has to save Princess Peach from the clutches of the evil Bowser, and this time his path hops across an amazing variety of planetoids.

Add in dizzying perspectives, weird gravity effects, and finely-honed motion controls, and you end up with a game that has scored 97 out of 100 on Metacritic.com and is expected to sell 16 million copies worldwide, according to online prediction market simExchange.com.

"It definitely captures the essence of what makes Mario so great," said Jeremy Parish, features editor at gaming news Web site 1up.com, which scored the game a 9.5 out of 10.

"Some hard-core gamers might be turned off by how cutesy this is, but if you look beyond that, the gameplay is rock-solid, it's incredibly new and inventive," Parish said.

For Sony, "Uncharted" is the kind of showcase game it sorely needs to drive sales of the PS3, which has languished behind the Wii and Microsoft's Xbox 360.

"Uncharted: Drake's Fortune" puts players on the trail of a hidden treasure of Sir Francis Drake, the 16th century English privateer. It is set in the modern day but crafted in the style of classic adventure movies - think Indiana Jones meets "Tomb Raider" meets "Lost."

Its lush jungle settings and mix of brawling, shooting and exploration set

it apart from other popular games this year that feature heavy military or alien-invasion themes.

"There are lots of sci-fi games that are very dark and brown and grey and sort of post-apocalyptic. We wanted to do something more lush and green and vibrant," said Evan Wells, co-president of Naughty Dog, the Sony studio known for cartoony games like "Crash Bandicoot" and "Jak and Daxter."

"The goal was to create this pulp action adventure and make it very cinematic and make it feel like playing the lead role of a hero in a summer blockbuster," Wells said.

"Uncharted" has an average rating of 89 on Metacritic.com, the highest of any exclusive game for the system along with "Ratchet & Clank Future: Tools of Destruction," which came out last month.

"It is another solid addition to the library and I'm sure that for some folks that is something that would push them to buy a console this holiday," said Billy Pidgeon, games analyst for market research firm IDC.

"Super Mario Galaxy" was released in the United States on November 12 while "Uncharted" comes out November 19.

Many Parents Avoid Video Games With Kids

Jesse Lackman says his son spends a dozen hours a week waging medieval combat across the dreary dreamscapes of computer games. Just don't expect to find Lackman sitting beside him battling ogres and dragons.

"It's just such a waste of time," said Lackman, 47, a power plant operator from Center, N.D. "I tell him, 'Do something that has some lasting value.'"

Lackman's avoidance of the digital diversions that captivate his 15-year-old son, Tyrus, is shared by many parents. More than four in 10, or 43 percent, of those whose young children play video or computer games never play along with them, according to an Associated Press-AOL Games poll released Monday.

While experts debate whether electronic gaming is bad news or a blessing for children and their families, many parents are voicing their preference by never - or seldom - joining their kids when it's time to slay cyber scoundrels.

Besides those who simply don't play the games with their children, another 30 percent say they spend less than an hour a week doing so. All told, about three in four parents of young gamers never or hardly ever touch the stuff.

"I don't think it's good for them, the violence, the obsession," said Karen Kimball, 55, of Hale, Minn., another nonplayer who estimates her 17-year-old son plays 25 hours weekly. "No longer is it, 'Let's go out and throw a football.'"

Those who game with their children are likelier to be younger, single and part-time workers than those who don't, the poll showed.

Among them is stay-at-home dad Marvin Paup, 33, of Golden Valley, Ariz., who says he plays 30 hours a week with his son and dozens more on his own.

Their current favorite is "Halo 3," a shooter game played online by thousands of players at a time. His state-of-the-art equipment includes an Xbox 360 console, surround-sound turned up "really, really loud" and a 65-inch wide-screen television, he said.

"That game has bonded me with him," he said of his 10-year-old son Allen. "It's like a whole new reality with me and him."

Overall, the survey highlighted how pervasive - yet age-related - interest in electronic gaming is today.

According to the poll, in which only adults were questioned, 81 percent of children age four to 17 play computer or video games at least occasionally, compared with 38 percent of adults. Typically, both adult and child gamers play two hours weekly - half play more and half less - including about three in 10 who play five hours or more each week.

Reflecting the technology's relatively recent introduction, 59 percent of those age 18 to 29 play at least sometimes, double the rate for people age 50 to 64. There is little difference among users by race or region, with middle-income earners likeliest to indulge.

"It's something to take your mind off business and everything else," said Todd Williams, 33, a salesman from Lexington, Ky., who estimates he plays 10 hours weekly, especially interactive adventure games. "I guess it's the time, which is seldom, that I spend alone."

Sales of games and gaming hardware are rising steadily, said David Riley, marketing director of the NPD Group, a market research firm. He estimates that video and computer game sales this year will total $19 billion in the U.S., up from $13.5 billion last year.

Even so - and despite the publicity given to newer game consoles like the Nintendo Wii, Sony's PlayStation 3 and Microsoft's Xbox 360 - the proportion of adults saying they play electronic games was virtually unchanged from April 2006, when an AP-AOL poll asked the same question.

Casual games like card or board games were the favorite of 31 percent of gamers, about twice the number who like action games, the next most popular alternative. About half of women cited casual games as their favorites, triple the number of men who did so, while twice as many males than females preferred action games.

Adventure, strategy and sports games were also among the most popular.

The poll also found that among gamers:

* 44 percent said they play over the Internet;

* 26 percent said they spent nothing on the pastime last year, another 46 percent spent up to $200 and 12 percent spent $500 or more, with men usually the bigger spenders;

* Price is the chief factor for people purchasing a gaming console, followed by the availability of games.

The poll involved telephone interviews with 2,016 adults conducted Oct. 9-11 and 16-18, and had a margin of sampling error of plus or minus 2.2 percentage points. Included were 770 people who said they play computer or video games, for whom the margin of sampling error was plus or minus 3.5 points.

New Antivirus Software for Playstation 3

Video game consoles, which are increasingly being used to surf the Internet, aren't generally equipped with antivirus protection like PCs.

Security vendor Trend Micro Inc. thinks they should be, though. It has launched software for Sony's Playstation 3 that promises to block malicious Web pages and those dealing in sex, drugs and violence.

The company bills the software as the first of its kind for a home gaming system. It was released earlier this month as part of a PS3 upgrade and will be free until April.

Some industry experts wonder whether consumers will leap for the technology the way they snap up security products for the more vulnerable PC and whether protection for video game consoles is really necessary.

"I think the jury's still out," said Daniel Ives, an analyst at Friedman Billings Ramsey. "Over the coming years, as the console becomes more common in terms of Web browsing, that's when you can really try to gauge what type of opportunity it is for the antivirus vendors."

Tokyo-based Trend Micro's software applies the company's technologies for identifying Web sites that host malicious code and those that serve as launch pads for scams to steal passwords, financial data and other personal information.

The company says video game players are increasingly vulnerable to Web attacks as they use their consoles for more than just gaming. It vows the new software will make PS3 users feel safer browsing the Internet.

In addition to blocking malicious Web sites, parents can use the software to block their children's access to sites that depict illegal activities or sexually oriented material. A password is needed to access that feature.

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A-ONE's Headline News
The Latest in Computer Technology News
Compiled by: Dana P. Jacobson

OLPC Launches 'Give 1, Get 1' Laptop Promo

One Laptop Per Child's long-awaited "Give 1, Get 1" program launched Monday at www.laptopgiving.org. For the next 15 days only, geeks and other supporters of computing for kids can pay $399 to get two XO laptops - one of which will automatically be sent to a child in the developing world.

Wayan Vota, editor of the OLPCNews Web site, said his site is getting heavy traffic from readers talking about their experiences in making the purchase. "Everyone I know is buying one," he said in a telephone interview.

The purchase process was quite simple, Vota added. OLPC is using PayPal for online payments, so it was "click, click, you're done," Vota said. The purchase price is $399 plus $24.95 in shipping.

Douglas Beagley was one of the first to order. He noted that the operator told him that the entire $399 purchase price was tax deductible, even though technically he is only donating half of his purchase - the "give" in "Give 1, Get 1."

Taxpayers must deduct the value of any thank-you gift they receive in exchange for a donation, so the operator's statement appears to misstate the extent of the tax deduction. Purchasers should be sure to deduct only half the amount on their taxes.

Another question about OLPC has been whether and how the organization would provide support. At least as far as Give 1, Get 1 buyers are concerned, the answer appears to be that OLPC is not offering any.

The terms and conditions for the sale states: "Although we believe you will love your XO laptop, you should understand that it is not a commercially available product and, if you want help using it, you will have to seek it from friends, family, and bloggers."

OLPC claims that by participating in the Give 1, Get 1 initiative, buyers are joining an "informal network of XO laptop users in the developed world" who will support users in the developing world. In other words, there is no tech support, but buyers may purchase a fee-based support service.

"We urge participants in the G1G1 initiative to think of themselves as members of an international educational movement rather than as 'customers,'" the contract says.

Vota called this language an "interesting way for them to keep from having to handle service requests." OLPC doesn't currently offer any documentation other than a wiki. "One page on a wiki does not make a constructive user guide," he said. "They need to have some comprehensive support plan in place."

It's not only buyers in North America who need a support plan. "Ministers in the developing world need this in order to be able to buy laptops," Vota said. "Without a maintenance plan, what are they supposed to do, tell the kids to get a screwdriver and fix it themselves? That's Humpty Dumpty on a massive scale."

On the other hand, Vota said, "OLPC is trying to get people engaged." With its innovative Sugar interface, "this is not a replacement for your Xbox or your MacBook. It's a tool for children to learn. Parents will have to

be involved with helping children use the machines."

In testing, children appear to pick up the Sugar interface easily, Vota said. But adults will have to realize that it’s "not Mac or Windows or even Linux - it’s a total revisioning of a computer interface." Vota said he doubted that OLPC would open the Give 1, Get 1 program up beyond the current two-week window "because it would take energy away" from getting the laptops placed in the developing world.

Dell Announces All-in-One ’XPS One’

Dell launched the all-in-one Dell XPS One on Friday, a rival to both the Gateway One as well as the Apple iMac.

Although the company won’t begin shipping the new PCs for a few days, Dell is accepting orders on the company’s Web site. Prices range from $1,499 on up to about $2,400, according to Dell.

Like the iMac or Gateway all-in-one PCs, Dell is touting the XPS One as a unified, space-saving experience. The XPS One contains some components typically found in laptops - a 2.0-Mpixel camera, an array microphone, glass LCD, and an Mobile PCI Express (MXM) graphics card module - plus desktop performance. In all models, the display measures 20 inches, while the included processor is either an Intel Core 2 Duo E4500 or E6550. Two gigabytes of RAM come standard.

Dell is pitching the one in four different configurations - the "Essential," "Music," "Performance" and "Entertainment". Of note is the latter model, which includes both a high-performance 256-Mbyte ATI Radeon HD 2400 (just days after the official launch of the Radeon 3850) and a Blu-ray writer drive.

In a PC Magazine review, analyst Joel Santo Domingo could find little fault with the XPS One, ranking it on par or superior to the Apple and Gateway machines, and awarded it an Editor’s Choice. "The Dell XPS One, like the HP Blackbird 002, uses design to add ’Wow,’ and just about everything about the design and features make sense," Santo Domingo wrote. "This is the all-in-one PC to beat for now."

Judge To White House: Back Up E-mail

The White House must preserve e-mail and maintain copies of millions of backup e-mail messages that were allegedly deleted improperly from servers, according to a temporary restraining order issued Monday by a U.S. judge.

The order from Judge Henry Kennedy in the U.S. District Court for the District of Columbia was a victory for the Citizens for Responsibility and Ethics in Washington (CREW), a watchdog group that filed suit against the Executive Office of the President and the National Archives and Record Administration in September. The group contends that the White House has not been accountable about the deleted e-mail messages and has a deficient e-mail archival system in place.

The lawsuit also alleged that the defendants knowingly failed to recover, restore, and preserve millions of electronic communications records in the White House. CREW alleged that the e-mail messages were improperly deleted from the servers.

CREW said that if any copies of the deleted e-mail messages existed, those would be on backup storage devices, and asked for devices and documents to be preserved.

The restraining order will add transparency to "an administration committed more to secrecy than compliance with the law," said Anne Weismann, chief counsel for CREW, in a statement referring to the administration of President George Bush.

The White House routinely assured CREW that it had a proper e-mail archiving system in place, according to court filings related to the case. White House officials couldn’t be reached for comment.

The White House discovered in 2005 that an unknown number of e-mail messages were missing from its archive, said Keith Roberts, the deputy general counsel of the White House Office of Administration, in a May briefing to the congressional Committee on Oversight and Government Reform. Roberts also stated that a contractor responsible for daily audits of the e-mail system and archiving failed to detect and report the problems at the time.

US Control Of Internet Remains Issue

A U.N.-sponsored Internet conference ended Thursday with little to show in closing the issue of U.S. control over how people around the world access e-mail and Web sites.

With no concrete recommendations for action, the only certainty going forward is that any resentment about the American influence will only grow as more users from the developing world come online, changing the face of the global network.

"I think that there are many Third World countries and developing countries and people from Asia and so on who are pressuring for changes," said Augusto Gadelha Viera, coordinator of the Brazilian Internet steering committee and chairman of a closing session on emerging issues at the four-day Internet Governance Forum.

As the conference drew to a close, Russian representative Konstantin Novoderejhkin called on the United Nations secretary-general to create a working group to develop "practical steps" for moving Internet governance "under the control of the international community."

At issue is control over Internet domain names, the monikers after the "dot" like "com" and "org" that are crucial for computers to find Web sites and route e-mail.

The domain name system is now controlled by the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers, a Marina del Rey, Calif.-based nonprofit over which the U.S. government retains veto power. By controlling the core systems, the United States indirectly influences the way much of the world uses the Internet.

The Internet Governance Forum, the result of a compromise world leaders reached two years ago to try to resolve the issue of U.S. control, has no decision-making powers. At most those seeking change can use the conference to pressure the United States to cede control.

The United States insists that the existing arrangements ensure the Internet's stability and prevent a country from trying to, say, censor Web sites by pulling entries out of the domain name directories.

Supporters of the current system denounced the Russian proposal.

"The Russian proposal seeks to exponentially increase government interference in the ICANN process, introducing a dangerous and destabilizing force into a global Internet addressing system that has been a paragon of stability under the current oversight structure," said Steve DelBianco, executive director of NetChoice, a coalition of high-tech leaders like Time Warner Inc.'s AOL, eBay Inc. and Yahoo Inc.

Brazilian officials, however, called for an independent ICANN and sought more concrete recommendations out of the forum; if not this year, then by the time the last one is held in 2010.

"As we approach the end we're going to have to see what the world wants and perhaps it will be necessary to take more concrete decisions, or if not decisions, recommendations," said Hadil da Rocha Vianna, co-chairman of the forum's advisory group and director of science and technology at Brazil's foreign ministry.

There's little indication, though, that the U.S. government and ICANN plan to cede their roles over domain names anytime soon.

Internet pioneer Vint Cerf, who stepped down as ICANN's chairman earlier this month, dismissed the complaints as misguided.

"I think (there are) a small number of countries that are very agitated and almost don't care what the facts are," he said. "It's a very small vocal group bothered by this issue. ICANN has existed for eight years and done a great job with its plans for internationalization."

ICANN recently elected its first chairman from outside the United States and started tests on domain names entirely in other languages, something many countries have sought to expand Internet usage among those unfamiliar with English.

But ICANN still must craft guidelines on how to assign such names and resolve any conflicts or complaints. For example, should the operators of China's ".cn" automatically be entitled to the Chinese version of that and ".com," or might Taiwan have a claim as well?

Governments that criticize ICANN and the U.S. role are seeking more influence over such policy matters.

Cerf said the forum's mandate as a discussion venue free of decisions or recommendations results in better dialogue. The climate would change, he said, if participants spent their time hammering out consensual agreements.

"It's a non-negotiating climate and I can't emphasize how important that is," Cerf said. "The opinions expressed here help inform ICANN."

Other issues discussed at the forum included how to provide greater Internet access to the 5 billion people around the world still offline and how to combat cybercrime like child pornography, identity theft, credit card fraud and terrorism.

The next forum will held next year in New Delhi, India.

Yahoo, Jailed Journalists Settle Lawsuit

Yahoo Inc., reeling from a growing backlash over human rights and its China operations, settled a lawsuit Tuesday that accused it of illegally helping the Chinese government jail and torture two journalists.

Neither side disclosed details other than to agree Yahoo would pay the attorneys fees of Shi Tao and Wang Xiaoning and the family member who sued on their behalf. Yahoo also said it would "provide financial, humanitarian and legal support to these families."

The settlement has reopened debate over Internet companies cooperating with governments that deny freedom of speech and crack down on journalists.

It marked a dramatic change of heart for Yahoo, which had steadfastly maintained it had to comply with a request from Chinese authorities to share information about the online activities of the two Chinese nationals.

But Yahoo’s cooperation turned into a public relations nightmare over the last week after irate federal lawmakers lambasted it on Capitol Hill, accusing it of collaborating with an oppressive regime.

"While technologically and financially you are giants, morally you are pygmies," House Foreign Affairs Committee Chairman Tom Lantos, D-Calif., said at a hearing.

Alibaba.com, China’s biggest online commerce firm, has run Yahoo’s mainland China operations since Yahoo bought a 40 percent stake in Alibaba in 2005. Shi and Wang sued Yahoo and Alibaba in April.

Yahoo would not say whether its dealings in China or Alibaba’s mode of responding to government requests will change as a result of the settlement. But Yahoo has said it only owns a 40 percent stake in Alibaba and has no control over the Chinese company, a subsidiary of Alibaba Group.

Many other U.S. companies, including Google Inc., Cisco Systems Inc. and Microsoft Corp., are facing similar quandaries in China, said business professor Peter Navarro of the University of California, Irvine.

"They have all crossed a gray ethical line in China with their anything-for-a-buck mentality," Navarro said. "I don’t believe that will change without a broader examination of the U.S.-China relationship."

He and other China watchers said the settlement would do little to stem similar behavior by other U.S. business operating in one of the world’s fastest growing economies.

"Congress hasn’t figured out that Yahoo is not the only culprit," said Navarro, who just published the book "Coming China Wars."

Shi, a former writer for the financial publication Contemporary Business News, was jailed under state secrecy laws for allegedly providing state secrets to foreigners. Shi’s e-mail allegedly contained notes about a government memo on media restrictions.

Wang was arrested in 2002 in connection with anonymous e-mails and other political writings he posted online. They are both serving 10 year prison sentences.

The pair were represented in the lawsuit by The World Organization for Human Rights in Washington, D.C.

At the congressional hearing, Yahoo Chief Executive Jerry Yang and General Counsel Michael Callahan apologized to Shi’s mother, who sat behind them.

Yang met with family members afterward.

"After meeting with the families, it was clear to me what we had to do to make this right for them, for Yahoo and for the future," Yang said in a statement Tuesday. "We are committed to making sure our actions match our values around the world."

Yang said the company was establishing a "human rights fund to provide humanitarian and legal aid to dissidents who have been imprisoned for expressing their views online."

The journalists’ U.S. attorney, Morton Sklar, said Yahoo’s will to fight the lawsuit withered amid growing outcry after members of Congress accused company officials of misleading them.

"There was a dramatic change in their position and that was strong incentive to settle," Sklar said. "They did not want to be on the wrong side of this issue."

Sklar said he suspects there are many more dissidents in Chinese jails because of U.S. companies’ cooperation with the Chinese government. Sklar said there may be other lawsuits filed and further pressure on Capitol Hill if U.S. companies don’t soon change their business practices in China.

"They will have to recognize they have to do more than just follow the law," Sklar said. "They can negotiate with the host countries and not be complicit in torture."

Lantos also called on other Internet companies to "resist any attempts by authoritarian regimes to make them complicit in cracking down on free speech, otherwise they simply should not do business in those markets."

"It took a tongue-lashing from Congress before these high-tech titans did the right thing and coughed up some concrete assistance for the family of a journalist whom Yahoo had helped send to jail," Lantos said in a statement. "What a disgrace."

Cyber Bullying Bedevils Japan

For many Japanese children, a cell phone is a social lifeline they can’t imagine being without. For high school student Makoto, it became an instrument of mental torture that nearly drove him to suicide.

"Even when I stopped going to school and stayed at home, my cell phone kept ringing with harassing e-mails," said Makoto, who became anorexic and rarely emerged from his room for nearly half a year after becoming the target of "cyber bullying."

Makoto, now 19 and working as a hair stylist after graduating from high school, said classmates posted photos of him along with insults on a Web site and e-mailed him at all hours telling him to die. He attempted suicide twice.

"When people tell you your life is not worth living, you start to think that way," said Makoto, who requested that his last name not be used.

"I couldn’t believe in human beings anymore."

Schoolyard bullying has long bedeviled Japan and, as in other countries, has taken a high-tech twist in recent years.

Ten percent of high school students said they have been harassed through e-mails, websites or blogs, a recent survey by the Hyogo Prefectual Board of Education showed.

Cyber bullying is a global trend, but the anonymity it provides for perpetrators may have extra significance in Japan, where wariness of direct confrontation is a cultural norm, said Shaheen Shariff, principal investigator for the International Project on Cyber Bullying at McGill University in Canada.

"Something is falling through the cracks, so they need to address what the problem is," she said in a phone interview.

"Are they (children) too controlled, are they under too much pressure to be academically successful, do they have an avenue to express their feelings ... are those taboos?" Shariff said.

Most cyber bullying in Japan, where 96 percent of high school students have their own cell phone, is conducted through mobile phones with Internet and e-mailing capabilities.

Common methods include e-mailing pictures showing victims’ genitals to classmates and posting insults on class Web sites.

Experts say high-tech bullying is far harder for parents and teachers to police than physical violence because of the anonymity of cyber space and a lack of technical knowledge.

"Schools often do not have Internet-savvy teachers, and parents cannot control or see what is going on in the cyber world," said Yasukawa of the National Web Counseling Conference.

"No one knows what is going on."

The obscurity of cyber bullying is making the problem of bullying, which

schools have long been accused of sweeping under the carpet, even harder to address.

The problem drew public attention in July, when an 18-year-old boy leapt to his death at his high school in Kobe, western Japan, after classmates posted a nude photo of him on a Web site and repeatedly sent him e-mails demanding money.

The school first denied bullying had occurred and only admitted that was the case after some of the teen’s classmates were arrested.

"Things that shouldn’t have happened are secretly settled and hidden by schools as if they never took place," said Chiharu Utsumi, a representative of the Association for the Bereaved by School Accidents and Events, whose 11-year-old son committed suicide 13 years ago after being beaten by his teacher at school.

Education ministry surveys from 1999 to 2005 reported no suicides related to bullying, but the ministry decided earlier this year to review 16 cases that took place over the six year period.

Some Japanese schools and parents are already using e-mail filtering software and special settings on cell phones and computers that protect children from harassment by blocking messages sent through suspect servers or IP addresses.

But experts agree that the solution to cyber-bullying requires more than the latest technology.

"In terms of technology, e-mail filtering systems are effective," said Motohiro Hasegawa, associate professor of Department of Information and Culture at Kinjo Gakuin University.

"But in the end, the problem is not about technology - it is about humans."

UN Internet Forum Focuses On Fighting Sex Predators

The second UN forum on governance of the Internet has closed with participants agreeing on the need to protect children from sexual predators using the web to lure victims.

Participants at the UN Internet Governance Forum (IGF) in Rio de Janeiro also called for finding ways to expand web access to close the gap between the world’s richest and poorest countries.

But the meeting, which was attended by more than 1,300 representatives of governments, the private sector and the Internet from 109 countries, centered on keeping children safe from pedophiles lurking on the Internet.

"While there were disagreements on certain topics such as access and diversity, there was a consensus regarding protecting children," French delegate Bernard Behnamou told AFP.

During the forum, which started Monday, the Council of Europe unveiled a game - called the Wild Web Woods - designed to teach children how to stay away from sexual predators and other Internet dangers.

Council of Europe Deputy Secretary General Maud de Boer-Buquicchio encouraged countries to join a convention seeking to strengthen international cooperation in tracking down "pedo-pornographers" and "groomers" of children.

While web pedophilia was a top issue at the forum, participants also discussed the need to reduce inequality in Internet access between rich and developing countries.

Brazil’s Augusto Gadelha, who represented his government’s science and technology ministry, said the Internet "must be governed for the benefit of all of humanity."

Gadelha called for "affordable prices" for developing nations to gain more Internet access.

Forum participants also insisted that the World Wide Web should maintain a cultural and linguistic diversity.

"The Internet must widen to reflect, in its content and address system, the cultural and linguist diversity that exists," Gadelha said.

European, Brazilia, Chinese and Indian participants called for "greater independence" at the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN), the US-based body overseeing the assignment of domain names and addresses.

Evacuation Of eBay Building Ends

EBay employees who were evacuated from their offices Wednesday after a suspicious-looking package was found in the company’s mailroom were allowed to return to work after a bomb squad determined the parcel was harmless.

More than 200 eBay were ordered out of one of nine buildings at the online auction company’s headquarters when workers found the package just before 8 a.m. They were allowed to return about 12:30 p.m.

"It has happened before, but it is a very rare thing," eBay spokesman Hani Durzy said of the scare. "EBay is a company and an entity in Silicon Valley and is not immune to what other companies and organization have to deal with."

Durzy refused to describe what about the package raised alarms.

EBay’s whole San Jose campus houses a work force of about 2,500.

The evacuated workers were given the option of waiting outside while police and firefighters investigated, finding another building to work in or working from home, according to Durzy.

UK Wants Net Companies To Fight Terror

British Prime Minister Gordon Brown wants Internet companies to help stifle online terrorist propaganda, he told lawmakers Wednesday, as officials say they plan to meet leading service providers to find ways of putting a lid on extremist content.

But the providers argue they already do all they can to fight illegal terrorist material online, and experts say even powerful filters cannot block determined users from getting their message out.

"Fundamentally, it’s a losing proposition," said Ian Brown, a research fellow at the Oxford Internet Institute, noting that even countries such as China and Myanmar have had trouble with their online censorship efforts.

The prime minister’s proposal comes as the European Union considers ways to sanction Web sites that display terror propaganda or recruit for terrorist groups.

Addressing lawmakers, the prime minister said Home Secretary Jacqui Smith was "inviting the largest global technology and Internet companies to work together to ensure that our best technical expertise is galvanized to counter online incitement to hatred."

The Home Office said it would meet leading British Internet service providers to examine ways of curbing online propaganda, but said Brown’s plan had not yet been considered in detail. Not clear, for instance, was whether the plan would require new laws or different ways of enforcing existing regulations.

British law already forbids the publication of statements likely to be seen as encouraging terrorism or the dissemination of terrorist material, such as bomb-making information, according to the Internet Watch Foundation, an EU-funded body that works with the British government to monitor and remove illegal online content.

Under so-called "notice and take down" procedures, authorities, companies and individuals can demand that Internet service providers remove content considered to be unlawful. That includes child pornography, as well libelous, obscene or terrorist material, the group said.

Although the removal of child pornography is relatively uncontroversial, service providers have expressed unhappiness at having to shut down their customers’ sites over, for example, allegations of libel, where guilt is difficult to determine at a glance. They are unlikely to welcome similar demands over material that allegedly glorifies terrorism.

Besides taking down their own customers’ sites, service providers also might be pressured to block ones hosted abroad. The government might draw up a list of banned sites, similar to one the Internet Watch Foundation has maintained since 2004 and updates twice daily to block Britons from visiting child pornography sites hosted overseas.

Another method might be to persuade search engines like Google Inc. or Yahoo Inc. to filter out prohibited content from their search results, or manage their searches so that the words "bomb," "al-Qaida," or "video" did not lead users to terrorist-related sites.

But both these measures would do little to deter the computer-literate youth being targeted by al-Qaida, Ian Brown said. He noted that users could still swap terror-related content through file-sharing networks,

discussion forums, or access material through sophisticated proxy servers and programs that allow users to browse the Net anonymously.

Efforts to use Internet service providers to police online content amounted to a "censorship proposal" and was bound to be problematic, said John Gage, vice president and chief researcher for Sun Microsystems Inc.

"It’s one of these things that’s going to be very difficult to implement," he said.

U.S. Panel Urges Vigilance On China Spying, Cyber War

Chinese espionage posed "the single greatest risk" to U.S. technology, a congressional advisory panel said on Thursday and called for efforts to protect industrial secrets and computer networks.

The U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission also called in its annual report to Congress for closer work with China to promote energy security and deal with environmental problems such as climate change and pollution.

The panel urged the U.S. Congress to examine "military, intelligence, and homeland security programs that monitor and protect critical American computer networks and sensitive information, specifically those tasked ith protecting networks from damage caused by cyber attacks."

"Chinese espionage activities in the United States are so extensive that they comprise the single greatest risk to the security of American technologies," the report said.

China was supplementing impressive gains in research and development of commercial and military technology with an "aggressive and large-scale industrial espionage campaign" that required S. Congress to examine and consider increasing funding for export controls and counterintelligence, it said.

China’s military, growing and making technological gains at a pace that often surprised experts, also required greater scrutiny, said the report, based on hearings with experts and officials over the past year.

"Sophisticated weapon platforms are coming off production lines at an impressive pace and with impressive quality," it said. It recommended beefed up U.S. intelligence and checks into whether the Chinese were gaining military technology from research conducted by U.S. firms in China.

The commission, set up by Congress in 2000 to examine potential Chinese threats to U.S. economic and national security, urged similar measures to protect space assets in the wake of China’s controversial anti-satellite test in January.

The report called on Congress and the U.S. government to cooperate to help Taiwan modernize its military and boost its capacity for operating jointly with U.S. and allied forces.

China "must stop providing trade and diplomatic cover to countries such as North Korea and Iran" amid concerns about illicit weapons programs,

it said.

China had improved its record in halting proliferation of dangerous weapons and components since the 1990s, the report said. But Chinese proliferation continued and China’s opaque government made it hard to determine whether those cases were deliberate or caused by rogue Chinese firms, it said.

A separate U.S. congressional panel monitors human rights and civil liberties in China. But the Economic and Security Review Commission used the 2007 report to highlight concerns prompted by China’s tight control of media and Internet.

"China’s control and manipulation of information make it difficult or impossible for officials responsible for food and product safety in the United States and other nations to identify potential safety problems in Chinese imports on a timely basis and intervene," it said.

Media in China, all state-controlled, were used by Beijing to "create deep feelings of nationalism," the report observed. It warned that such nationalism may constrain China’s options during international incidents in ways that could risk "turning a misunderstanding into a conflict."

The Top 10 Most Annoying, Frustrating, Irritating, and Sinister Online Ads

Today’s annoying online ads are a mix of Big Brother meets Madison Avenue, old-fashioned in-your-face marketing, and tactics that are downright mean. I rounded up a list of today’s ten most annoying online ad categories. Many of them probably have you longing for the days when the most pesky ads promoted an X-10 wireless camera.

Some of these ads flash, blink, vibrate, and somersault around your browser window. Others expand, pop open a window (even if you have a pop-up blocker), and play sounds or video. The most sinister don’t appear to do anything at all and quietly attempt to hijack your PC.

What’s behind this new breed of advertising? Naturally, money is greasing the wheels of online ad innovation. Consider eMarketer’s forecast, which indicates that U.S. Internet companies are spending $21.4 billion in 2007 on online ads. That budget will grow - by 2011, an estimated $42 billion will go toward online ads, according to eMarketer.

However, as you grind your teeth trying to ignore a banner for Smiley Central riddled with talking emoticons, keep in mind that as irritating as Web ads are, they help keep Web content free. Without them, we’d all have to pay a nickel every time we wanted to watch a YouTube video of people riding down escalators in shopping carts.

Even so, "rich media advertising" can consume a lot of CPU cycles and tax your system - never mind your patience. Other forms of online advertising, such as column ads (those adjacent to content on a page), often interfere with surrounding content. When online advertising goes too far, sometimes you have to fight back with ad-blocking tools.

What’s too much advertising? What’s the just the right amount? That’s for you to decide.

1. Old-School, Annoying, Attention-Grabbing Ads

Recently I was having trouble focusing on the text of a CNN.com story. I quickly realized that my concentration troubles were due not to a bout of attention deficit disorder, but rather to a LowerMyBills ad that was blinking, jiggling, and dancing beside the text I was trying to read.

It occurred to me then: Why are online ads so obnoxious? The answer is, they work by grabbing our attention. Just as I can't ignore the silhouetted images of two-stepping cowboys in the LowerMyBills ads, the LowerMyBills brand is now stuck in my head like a song I hate and can't shake. (LowerMyBills would call that effective marketing).

Experts say that obtrusive ads are going out of vogue in exchange for ads tailored to the interests of individual Web users. If that's true, would someone please tell CNN.com? In the meantime, if you're interested in death by LowerMyBills ads, visit the Web site Adverlicio.us, which has archived nearly all the LowerMyBills ads.

2. Noisy Ads

Obnoxious isn't quite strong enough an adjective to describe ads that automatically start playing audio on my PC without any warning. I'm not naming names, but I've spotted such ads on plenty of sites. It leads me to wonder: Whose hair-brained idea was it to hijack my PC's audio, anyway?

If you want to place blame, start with the advertiser, of course, but then consider the Web site where the ad appears. According to online-ad experts, Web site owners set the policy governing the types of ads their pages display.

One online-advertising company, EyeWonder, says that about one out of ten video ads it creates on the behalf of its customers will initiate audio when you roll your pointer over the ad. Most advertisers provide a button to start the audio, says Jason Scheidt, director of marketing for EyeWonder.

3. Floating Ads

on - gulp - PCWorld.com) running across your screen as the page loads.

I asked one advertising insider (who didn't want to be identified) if he would confirm my suspicion that some advertisers intentionally make it impossible to find the Close button. His response? "Of course they do. These advertisers know they are getting away with something. And that 'something' is not about making your life easier."

4. Triple Threat: Floating Video Sales Pitch

Sometimes in the technology world, things go together like peanut butter and jelly. Other times, the convergence is a car wreck.

I spotted an online ad for Toyota in which a pint-size pitchman waltzed out from the lower-left corner of my screen. The ombination video-audio-floating-takeover ad simply started yakking, with no warning, and the ad didn't disappear until he was done. Talk about an annoying car salesperson.

5. Mouse-Over Land Mine Ads

an iPhone and other objects are pulverized in Blendtec blenders. Blendtec created the videos to promote its products in an unconventional way. The idea behind viral marketing is to make ads so compelling that a viewer wants to share them with a friend. Ideally, the viral ad, which is often a video, a picture, or a blog, spreads from inbox to inbox or blog to blog as quickly as a computer virus might.

The only problem with this often obnoxious form of advertising is that for every interesting viral ad we're subjected to at least a dozen annoying duds.

Sony tried to create buzz with a viral marketing campaign for its PlayStation Portable. Sony hired marketing company Zipatoni to create a blog titled "All I Want for Xmas Is a PSP" and pass it off as created by someone named Charlie. The blog contained glowing tributes to the PSP and linked to YouTube videos starring "Charlie" singing the praises of the handheld.

The blog created buzz all right, but not the positive kind that Sony sought. Word got out that both the blog and Charlie were fake. Immediately, Sony had to deal with an angry Web mob who ridiculed the vendor for trying to trick its customers. Sony eventually came clean and admitted to the charade.

Sony is in good company, joining other firms, such as Wal-Mart, that have taken grief for unsuccessful attempts at viral advertising.

7. Expanding Ads

PCWorld.com runs this type of ad on occasion as well.

8. Personal and Tailored Ads

The behavioral-advertising business is booming with major online ad companies, with DoubleClick leading the pack. These companies give me the creeps, because they track my Web whereabouts and likely know more about my surfing habits than I do. Many create digital dossiers of online users that advertisers can use to show you ads tailored to your online activities.

The move toward behavior-based marketing is a trend, says Greg Sterling, an analyst with mobile market research firm Opus Research in San Francisco. That trend motivated Google to acquire DoubleClick, with the intention of targeting and selling ads more effectively. Privacy activists, of course, are foaming at the mouth, concerned that Google and DoubleClick will know too much about Internet users.

This approach marks a shift from the online advertising model Google established, which displays ads based on a person's keyword searches.

To counter the trend, many privacy activists are urging the Federal Trade Commission to create a "Do Not Track" database; consumers registering there could opt out of being tracked by DoubleClick and other online marketers.

9. Malware-Laced Ads

No question about it: Online ads that deliver malicious software are beyond merely annoying. Security firm ScanSafe tracks dangerous banner ads that have shown up on MySpace, PhotoBucket, and other leading sites.

Such parasite ads typically contain a Flash file that silently installs a Trojan horse or backdoor program on vulnerable Windows systems. Reportedly, 12 million such ads came from RightMedia, an advertising firm in which Yahoo owns an 80 percent stake.

The most devious aspect of these ads is that they require no interaction from you, and Web sites sometimes deliver them innocently. They often come from third-party ad suppliers that act as middlemen between Web sites and advertisers. Sometimes the company delivering the ads to a site is unaware that a bad-apple advertiser has embedded Trojan horses in them. By sheer bad luck you could visit a Web site that inadvertently hosts a Trojan horse ad, and risk infection, says Mary Landesman, a senior researcher at ScanSafe.

"We find this stuff all the time," Landesman says. "We could report one every week."

10. Bait, Switch, and Infect Ads

A related type of online ad is the kind that entices you with too-good-to-be-true offers. Such messages predate the Web, of course, but online they cause a lot of grief, notes Paul Piccard, director of threat research at Webroot Software.

Earlier this month the Web site of the Arizona Daily Star in Tuscon was hit with a "maliciously coded online advertisement," according to the newspaper’s own report. The Star reports that the online ad was purchased by a company using a fraudulent credit card. The ad appeared on the newspaper’s site for 18 days and "directed some Web visitors to sites that could have installed harmful software," says the Star’s report.

Piccard says that such ads typically promote free software or another giveaway, trying to drive traffic to a booby-trapped Web page. If you click on such an ad, it whisks you away to a Web site that attempts to install malware onto your system through Web browser security holes.

As the Arizona Daily Star will attest, these ads can make their way onto legitimate sites and cause havoc. Piccard says that the malicious payloads these ads deliver to PCs include keyloggers (which collect and send personal identifying financial information), adware, and spyware.

What Can You Do?

For the online-ad weary, there is both good news and bad news.

The bad news: If you don’t like these ads, tough luck. Market observers say that today’s browser-based advertising technology is as creative as it is annoying. This breed of online ad technology is so tightly fused with browsers and Web sites that it’s extremely difficult to block.

The good news is that ad-blocking technology also continues to advance - although not nearly at the breakneck speed that ads do. If you want to learn more about additional defensive weapons, my colleague Steve Bass outlines a few of the latest and greatest tools in "15 Ways to Block Annoying Ads and Pop-Ups."

Marvel, Other Comics Go Online

Marvel is putting some of its older comics online Tuesday, hoping to reintroduce young people to the X-Men and Fantastic Four by showcasing the original issues in which such characters appeared.

It’s a tentative move onto the Internet: Comics can only be viewed in a Web browser, not downloaded, and new issues will only go online at least six months after they first appear in print.

Still, it represents perhaps the comics industry’s most aggressive Web push yet. Even as their creations - from Iron Man to Wonder Woman - become increasingly visible in pop culture through new movies and video games, old-school comics publishers rely primarily on specialized, out-of-the-way comic shops for distribution of their bread-and-butter product.

"You don’t have that spinner rack of comic books sitting in the local five-and-dime any more," said Dan Buckley, president of Marvel Publishing. "We don’t have our product intersecting kids in their lifestyle space as much as we used to."

Translate "kids’ lifestyle space" into plain English and you get "the Internet." Marvel’s two most prominent competitors currently offer online teasers designed to drive the sales of comics or book collections.

Dark Horse Comics now puts its monthly anthologies "Dark Horse Presents" up for free viewing on its MySpace site. The images are vibrant and large.

DC Comics has also put issues up on MySpace, and recently launched the competition-based Zuda Comics, which encourages users to rank each other’s work, as a way to tap into the expanding Web comic scene. Company president Paul Levitz said he expects to put more original comics online in coming years.

"We look at anything that connects comics to people," Levitz said. "The most interesting thing about the online world to me is the opportunity for new forms of creativity. ... It’s a question of what forms of storytelling work for the Web?"

For its mature Vertigo imprint, DC offers weekly sneak peeks at the first five or six pages of upcoming issues. The publisher also gives out downloadable PDF files of the first issues in certain series, timed to publication of the series in book or graphic novel format.

The Web release of DC’s "Y the Last Man" sent sales of that book collection soaring at Bridge City Comics in Portland, Ore., the shop’s owner Michael Ring said.

"They really do tend to be feeder systems," Ring said of online comics. "They give people that initial taste."

For Marvel, the general public has often already gotten its initial taste through movies like "Spider-Man" or the "Fantastic Four" franchises.

The publisher is hoping fans will be intrigued enough about the origins of those characters to shell out $9.99 a month, or $4.99 monthly with a year-long commitment. For that price, they’ll be able to poke through, say, the first 100 issues of Stan Lee’s 1963 creation "Amazing

Spider-Man" at their leisure, along with more recent titles like "House of M" and "Young Avengers." Comics can be viewed in several different formats, including frame-by-frame navigation.

Ring expects Marvel’s effort to put a slight dent in the back-issue segment of the comic shop industry, where rare, out-of-print titles sell for hundreds of dollars on eBay and at trade shows.

Though most comic fans are collectors, some simply want to catch up on the backstory of their favorite characters and would no longer have to pay top dollar to do so.

About 2,500 issues will be available at launch of Marvel Digital Comics, with 20 more being released each week.

On the Net:

http://marvel.com/

http://www.dccomics.com/

http://www.zudacomics.com/

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